

Unlikely Class Star

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From the moment my co-teacher first picked me up from training, I was told what a rough high school I was coming to. “We are in a low socio-economic neighborhood with a high number of low-achieving and even drop-out students.” Each day I was reminded of this fact with many students misbehaving or trying to sleep in my class. I had one student in particular who gave me quite a bit of trouble. He was an 11th grade boy who didn’t seem to place much importance on school, much less my once-a-week English Conversation Class. I struggled to keep him in his seat and quiet during class, without much success. I just chalked his behavior up to his coming from a family where he was likely expected to have a job to help his family pay the bills, instead of trying to find out what kind of person he really was. At the time, I was using an “English Class Star” program in class, where the student who tried the hardest and made the most gains during class that week would get his or her name on the star board and get a letter of praise sent home to his or her parents. There were a lot of students who were excited about this little incentive, but many, I admit, could have cared less. These were tough kids who didn’t think it was cool to be good students...or so I thought.

One day, I was erasing the board after class and I saw a note taped to the board. It was from my troublemaker, whose name I learned was Jae Won. In the note, he had asked me to make him the English Class Star. I admit that I was completely floored. Everyone told me that these were rough kids that didn’t care about school. They didn’t want to learn English because they were going to be delivery boys and work in other laboring jobs their whole lives. Jae Won’s note made me realize that no matter how many students actually fit the stereotype, you just can’t judge them all that way. It may be easier to group them all into a category, but we have to realize that each student is a unique person with different needs. It is our job to find out how to help them, the best we can.



I talked to Jae Won at the beginning of the next class and told him I had gotten his note. He was shy at first, but as soon as I addressed him by name, his eyes lit up. He said in Korean, “Teacher, you know my name?” I told him I did, because I cared about him as a student. From that day on he didn’t give me anymore trouble in class. I said hi to him by name every time we passed each other in the hallway. In three short weeks, Jae Won was our new English Class Star. Jae Won is a 12th grader now, so I don’t have classes with him, but I still make sure to say hi to him in the hallway.

I joke with him that I remember his name because he gave me so much trouble. That makes him laugh. I hope that I was able to show him that even someone from a different country who is confronted with 700 students can still respect and care about each of them.